







Chweddau



*Yr hen ŵr llwyd o'r cornel  
Gan ei dad a glywodd chwedl  
A chan ei dad fe glywodd yntau  
Ac ar ei ôl mi gofiais innau.*

The grey old man in the corner  
Of his father heard a story,  
Which from his father he had heard  
And after them I have remembered.

IN WELSH there is no distinction between legend, tale, fable and myth; *chwedl* covers all. Beryl Beare, in her introduction to *Wales: Myths and Legends* writes, somewhat glowingly, 'Wales itself is surely an enchanted land—or, at least, it must come closer to enchantment than most! It is a land of music, magic and mystery—qualities that are reflected time and again in its folklore.'

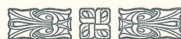
Welsh does distinguish between *chwedl* and *llên werin*, folklore—that which 'belongs to and issues from those whose daily life lies close to the earth'. Although Methodism and universal education severely eroded belief in their authenticity, Sir John Rhys believed that folk tales were not fairy tales for adults, but a vital and important part in the history and culture of a nation.

*Hanes*, history, is the final ingredient in the rich brew that is Welsh history, legend, mythology and folklore, where the demarcation lines are more often obscure than otherwise. 'I no longer believe anybody has a good grasp of the history of Wales,' writes Alice Thomas Ellis. 'It is too rich, too vivid and too confusing.' She goes on to point out how at one level, Wales abounds in sacred places, both pagan and Christian: there are holy wells and shrines, standing stones and Celtic crosses, an ancient

cultural landscape marked out with the bones of the early saints. At another level, giants and dragons inhabited the mountainous region of North Wales, while, elsewhere, maidens lived in lakes and sometimes married the sons of men. And everywhere there were the *tylwyth teg*, the fair folk, who Tony Roberts comments 'play such a dominant part in Welsh folklore that they seem like a parallel population of the country.' Indeed, in Elizabethan Wales, soothsayers and physicians claimed, in the most pragmatic manner, to walk with the fair folk on Tuesday and Thursday nights. They were known in other parts of Wales as *Bendith y Mamau*, the Mothers' Blessing, or *Plant Rhys Ddwfn*, the Children of Rhys the Deep. To refer to them as 'fairies' would degrade their status beyond recognition; they were an entity to be reckoned with.

At yet another level, there were the *canhwyllau cyrff*, the corpse candles, begged of the Lord by Saint David, so that his people might take warning and repent in time. And the *Toili*, the Phantom Funeral preceding an actual death, sometimes by days, sometimes by weeks, was too often observed by too many to be lightly dismissed.

Wales's most enduring myth was, of course Arthur, the Celtic military leader whose levies for his campaigns might have affected and been resented by the Church, hence the negative images of Arthur, where he appears at all, in the writings of clerics such as Gildas. But Arthur, nevertheless, became a legend amongst the British for his heroic stand against the Saxon invaders in the sixth century. Six centuries later he was to be re-invented by Geoffrey of Monmouth as the King Arthur of Arthurian tales. But for the Welsh he remained a Celtic hero, and a symbol of resistance throughout the ages.









*Bet y march, bet y guythur,  
bet y gugaun cletyfrut.  
Anoeth bid bet y arthur.*

There is a grave for March,  
A grave for Gwythur,  
A grave for Gwgawn Redsword;  
A mystery is the grave for Arthur.

*Arthur*

'The marvellous gestes and errant deeds related of king Arthur have been noised for so great a space that the truth has turned to fable and an idle song . . . The minstrel has sung his ballad, the story-teller told his story so frequently, little by little he has decked and painted, till by reason of his embellishment the truth stands hid in the trappings of a tale. Thus to make a delectable tune to your ear, history goes masking as fable.' *Maistre Wace* 1155

BY THE END of the twelfth century, Arthur was already becoming immortalised in European literature, largely because of Geoffrey of Monmouth's preposterous *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Written between 1137 and 1139, the *History* has as its climax the reign of King Arthur—a king and a realm of pure creation, a faithful reflection of an idealised twelfth-century knighthood, with Arthur as its feudal prince, his court, at Caerleon-upon-Usk, the centre of the most civilized land in Europe. The chivalric trappings were adopted by successive writers in their versions of the tales that proliferated on the continent after Geoffrey's *History* was translated into Norman French. Arthur's court became no more than a departure point for the adventures of his knights, and Arthur himself a marginalised figurehead engaged in trivial pursuits. This fanciful image of an Arthurian world is what has endured.

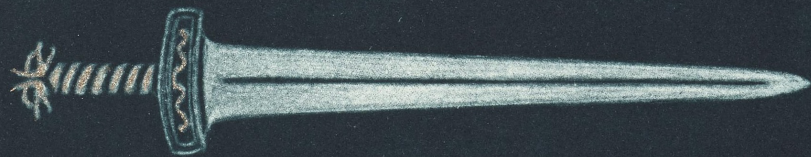
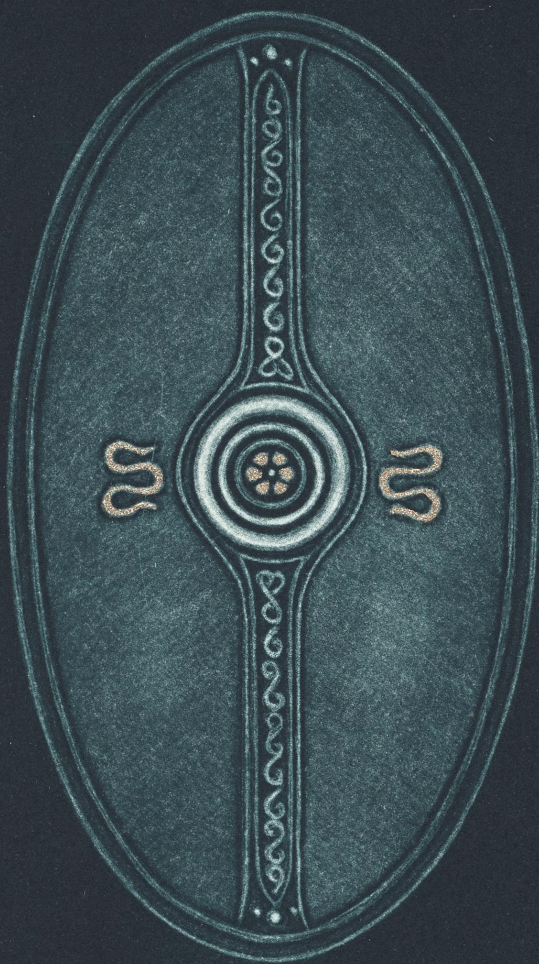
But Geoffrey was not entirely a shameless fabricator. He based his tales on native and Breton sources and on Welsh poetry. There was already, by the twelfth century, a substantial body of folklore in Wales, Cornwall and Brittany about the legendary Arthur, who rallied the Celts in the sixth century and stemmed the tide of Saxon invasions for a considerable time. William of Malmesbury, the first notable historian after the Norman Conquest, substantiated these facts. Certainly, a powerful military leader took on the task begun by the North Welsh chieftain, Ambrosius, in taking the offensive against the invaders, and was victorious as long as he ruled. There were no Saxon advances in mainland Britain from 514-547. Mount Badon was the decisive victory, and it came too late for Ambrosius. Welsh tradition ascribes the victory to Arthur, and refers to the phase of British ascendancy after Badon as Arthur's reign.

By the time Aneurin composed *The Gododdin* about the year 600, Arthur's name was a byword for heroism. He became a legend, his feats elaborated on by successive storytellers. The tenth-century tale of *Culhwch and Olwen* portrays him as a powerful ruler whose retainers are endowed with superhuman attributes. A Breton tale figures

him as a crowned king who waged war in Gaul as well as in Britain, and who is also immortal. Certain French clerics visiting Bodmin in 1113 were almost mobbed by a Cornish crowd, when the clerics dismissed as nonsense the local belief in Arthur's immortality. In fact, Arthur's immortality had become a most potent myth. *The Gododdin*, 'with its air of a requiem for lost glories', was a fair indicator for the fate of the British after the disaster of Arthur's last battle at Camlan. Unable to maintain a united front, Britain fragmented. Saxon advances in the south cut off the promontory of Somerset, Devon and Cornwall. Henceforth its people became merely 'West Welsh'—and ultimately, English. Further north, the Angles continued to force the Welsh westwards until Wales proper was separated from Cumbria and contracted towards its medieval limits. Almost three centuries later the Anglo-Saxons would be conquered by the Norman invaders.

It was the Anglo-Norman Plantagenets who recognised the danger in the enduring belief in Arthur's immortality. Significantly, Geoffrey's Arthur did not meet his end on the battlefield but was borne away to Avalon, which Geoffrey later equated with the Isle of the Blest—the Celtic Otherworld to which mortals could sometimes go, and more importantly from which they could return. Proving to the Welsh, who were the principal remnants of Arthurian Britain, that Arthur was dead and would not return to help them in their resistance to Norman oppression was surely the reason Henry II encouraged the monks of Glastonbury to dig for the grave of Arthur rumoured to be in the Abbey's cemetery. The well publicised finding of the hollowed-out log coffin, reputed to contain the bones of Arthur and his Queen, clearly left the Welsh unconvinced and later led Edward I to have the bones publicly displayed before having them reinterred before the high altar of the Abbey church.

When Henry Tudor, two centuries later, marched through Wales to confront Richard III, he exploited both his Welsh blood and the Arthurian legend. He bore as his standard the Red Dragon of Wales, and presented himself as the symbolic Arthur who had returned to save Britain. Ironically, the same year, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* was published in English, and the legend took on its definitive English form. It finishes with a meaningful epitaph for his hero: *Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus*, The Once and Future King. And all over Celtic Britain there still exist caves where Arthur sleeps, with or without his knights, waiting for the summons to restore the ancient glory of the 'Island of the Mighty'.









*Can ys mi myrtin  
guydi taliessin bithaud  
kyffredin vy darogan.*

For I, Myrddin,  
like Taliesin before me  
shall see my prophecy go far and wide.

*Myrddin — Merlin*

IT WAS Geoffrey of Monmouth who was responsible for transforming the legendary Welsh seer and poet, Myrddin, into the mythical Merlin, the magician and clairvoyant who played a crucial role in bringing about the conception of Arthur in Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. This was the Merlin who was to become prominent in twelfth-century French romances, reappear with dramatic force in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and figure in the early stages of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. He was still enjoying popularity in twentieth-century novels and films.

Geoffrey's source for his Merlin material was the *Historia Brittonum* of the ninth-century cleric Nennius. But he made several changes: Myrddin became Merlinus; his place of origin became Caer Myrddin—modern day Carmarthen—and Merlin replaced Ambrosius in a tale reported by Nennius about Vortigern.

In Geoffrey's *History*, Merlin's story begins in the time of the fifth-century king, Vortigern, who gave the Saxons their fatal footing in Britain. When they shook off his control and ravaged the country, Vortigern fled to Wales and tried to build a fortress in Snowdonia. But whatever was built one day, disappeared by the next. Vortigern's magicians advised him to find a fatherless boy, kill him and sprinkle his blood on the foundations. Such a boy was found at Carmarthen. His name was Merlin and since his mother had been impregnated by an incubus, he had no earthly father, and was a wonder child. He confounded the magicians by showing that the subsidence was caused by an underground pool, in which two dragons, one red, one white, fought each other, with varying fortunes. Merlin explained they represented, respectively, the British and Saxon peoples. He then predicted that Vortigern would be overthrown and the brothers Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon would restore the rightful dynasty.

The fortress itself has been identified as Dinas Emrys, the Fortress of Ambrosius, in Snowdonia. Archaeological excavations in the early 1950s revealed a British chieftain was in possession toward the close of the fifth century, enjoying a measure of wealth and luxury. Nearby was an artificial pool, which had been dug out in the first century A.D. No dragons were found!

Twelve years after the *History*, Geoffrey seems to have discovered further material about the legendary Myrddin of Welsh poetry. He composed his *Vita Merlini*, a rich blend of Celtic legend and pseudo history, presenting a portrait of Merlin which was totally at variance with that of the *History*. This Merlin lived a hundred years later, and in Northern Britain, but Geoffrey maintained it was the same Merlin.

Myrddin, the poet and prophet, is referred to in the tenth-century prophetic poem *Armes Prydein*, but it is largely thanks to the anthologist of *The Black Book of Carmarthen* that the poems and prophecies of Myrddin have

been preserved, and the tragic story emerges of how he became Myrddin Wyllt—wild or mad Myrddin.

Like his contemporary, Taliesin, he seems to have gravitated from the south to the north of Britain, attracted to the courts of powerful northern rulers. It was in the battle of Arfderydd, fought between two of these rulers, Rhydderch and Gwenddolau, that Myrddin's lord, Gwenddolau, lost his life and Myrddin lost his reason. He relates in his poems how he fled, after the battle, to the forest of Celyddon, wandering in madness and in fear of Rhydderch and racked with guilt that he killed his own nephew in that battle. For fifty years, he who was once a notable warrior, wearing a torque of gold, endured hardships in the Caledonian wilds, shivering under a threadbare coverlet among the snows and forest wolves, his sole companion a little pig, 'a rude bedfellow with sharp claws'. Weaving through this tale of personal misery and despair are the bleak prophecies of disaster resulting from the endless feuds amongst the Welsh themselves, 'treachery between brothers, when peace will long be banished.'

The battle of Arfderydd, in 573, was referred to in the Welsh triads as one of the 'Three Futile Battles', because it was fought over a 'Lark's Nest'. This was a grim play on words; the battle was fought over the disputed ownership of Fort Caverlock, 'The Lark's Fort', in Cumbria. It became, along with the battle of Camlan, a symbol of the futile internecine strife amongst the Welsh throughout the ages. Gerald of Wales commented of the Welsh, 'Their own inveterate habit of civil discord has caused this proud people to degenerate so much that they were no longer able to keep their foes at bay.' The Welsh have been described as a people of affliction and the Myrddin poems a map of that affliction. But Myrddin also prophesied that the Welsh would one day triumph, when 'glorious shall their dragon be, and all their rights restored.' This was the huge myth that grew with us over the centuries. A more accurate prophecy attributed to Myrddin is:

|                             |                                 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Eu Duw a moliant.</i>    | Their God they shall praise.    |
| <i>Eu hiaith a gadwant.</i> | Their language they shall keep. |
| <i>Eu gwlad a gollant</i>   | Their land they shall lose      |
| <i>Ond gwyllt Walia.</i>    | Except wild Wales.              |

The Myrddin of Welsh legend did not die; he sleeps in a cave on Bardsey Island. Interestingly, a deity named Myrddin was, in one cycle in Celtic mythology, identified with the Sun-god. Sir John Rhys suggests this was the deity specially worshipped at Stonehenge, which may account for Geoffrey of Monmouth's outlandish claim that Merlin brought about the erection of Stonehenge by magic. Bardsey Island is off the extreme westernmost point of West Wales, so Myrddin's point of departure was the descent of the sun into the western sea.









*As I can bear witness, they pay greater respect than any other people to their churches, to men in orders, the relics of the saints, bishops' crooks, bells, holy books and the Cross itself, for which they show great reverence . . . Nowhere can you see hermits and anchorites more abstinent and more spiritually committed than in Wales.*

Giraldus Cambrensis 1188

*The Saints*

THE age of Arthur and Myrddin, the so-called Dark Ages, was also known as the Age of the Saints. The monastery was one of the important features of the early church in Wales, many firmly established by the sixth century, storehouses of classical manuscripts during the centuries when Europe was in travail and Rome itself in barbarian hands. Frequently the monasteries were founded by 'Saints', historically the leaders of anchorite and missionary activities of the Church in Celtic lands during the sixth and seventh centuries. But the term 'saint' was rather generously bestowed.

Tony Roberts quips that in the fifth century, Sainthood was already a profession in Wales, the Saints in many cases being itinerant monks from princely families, who founded tiny cells, lived simply and preached their austere gospel. Little was recorded of their activities until the semi-biographical *Vitae* were written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These *Lives of the Saints* were largely the product of credulous medieval religiosity: 'Heads were cut off, picked up and put back . . . St Pirian sailed from Ireland on a sea monster, St Feock on a granite boulder and St Decumen, as well as his headless accomplishment, sailed on a bundle of twigs. St Brendan, riding from Ireland on a sea monster, met St Barre riding the opposite way on a horse.'

It should, however, be remembered that this was the age when 'Sainthood' itself was, to the popular mind, a concept of the magical order. Its essential characteristic was not moral goodness, but the possession of that mysterious power which works miracles. The *Lives*, as Rachel Bromwich points out, offer vital testimony to the bringing together of secular and ecclesiastical traditions under religious auspices. They are often little more than ecclesiastical hero-tales, in which a popular religious hero is brought into conflict with the secular power represented by the local king or lord, the conflict frequently being over a struggle for land, privileges and authority, but commonly portrayed in terms of a battle between divine or magical powers and conventional force-at-arms. Arthur features as the anti-hero in several of these *Lives*, his unique stature pointing to the saint's even greater achievement in getting the better of him. The *Lives*, in fact, constituted a well-defined genre, although containing traditional elements and perhaps some historical features.

As well as the emphasis its leaders placed on learning,

one of the peculiarities of the Celtic Church had been its tolerant attitude towards native lore. The close connection of Saint's names with healing wells shows a clear continuity with the Celtic veneration for water, while the frequency with which Saints' heads were 'cut off, picked up and put back' indicates an equally clear continuity with the cult of the head in Celtic mythology. For the Celts, the soul reposed in the head. The practice of embalming the severed heads of those they revered was their way of honouring great souls. Sometimes the heads were placed in sanctuaries, but more often in sacred rivers. Often they would escort the dead on their journey to the Otherworld, into the 'dark river', at the end of which was their rebirth.

The *Life* of at least one Welsh Saint encompasses both these residual elements of Celtic belief. It is the legend of seventh-century Gwenfrewi, Anglicized to Winifred, whose miraculous spring gave Flintshire its Holywell, and a centre for pilgrimage which survived throughout the Reformation.

Gwenfrewi was a niece of St Beuno, and the daughter of Thenith, a local ruler, who had appointed Beuno as her religious instructor, in return for a piece of land for a church. Caradog, the son of a local chieftain, Alyn of Penarlâg, or Hawarden, 'endeavoured to force her chastity', but having taken her vows, Gwenfrewi resisted and fled to St Beuno's church. Caradog pursued her, and when she still repulsed him, drew his sword and struck off her head. The head rolled down the hill to the church, and where it came to rest a spring of healing water gushed forth. Beuno cursed the murderer, who fell dead, then restored the head to the body, covering it with his mantle. He went into the church to pray, whereupon the girl rose up, 'as if from sleep', with a circle as small as a thread round her neck. The healing properties of the well became famous, and Gwenfrewi spent the rest of her life as a nun, eventually becoming the Abbess of Gwytherin in Denbighshire. Her subsequent, historically recorded, involvement in and contribution to ecclesiastical affairs are considerably less well known than the reputation of the well and the legend of how it came into being.

An interesting footnote to the legend is that Beuno also cursed Caradog's descendants, so that they barked like dogs, and could only be cured by immersion in the well. The 'Cŵn Annwn', the Dogs of the Otherworld, in Celtic mythology, were a pack of hounds whose howling also foretold death.









*The local inhabitants will assure you that the lake has many miraculous properties . . . What is more, those who live there sometimes observe it to be completely covered with buildings or rich pasture-lands, or adorned with gardens and orchards.*

Giraldus Cambrensis 1188

*Llangors Lake*

LLANGORS LAKE or Llyn Syfaddan lies in a hollow between the rivers Usk and Wye, overlooked by the Red Sandstone scarps of the Black Mountains and the Brecon Beacons. A beautiful sheet of water some two miles in length and one mile in width, it is the largest natural lake in South Wales. Man has been associated with it from prehistoric times and its crannog, the ancient Celtic lake dwelling near its northern shore is believed to have housed the 'llys' or court of the kings of Brycheiniog. As well as being rich in history, being a Welsh lake, it is also rich in myths and legends.

Since wells, springs, lakes and rivers were sacred to the Celts, they believed such natural phenomena capable of heralding future events. Llangors Lake continued to be renowned for its prophetic powers as late as the twelfth century. Gerald of Wales noted not only the wealth of fish in the lake, but its occasional green and blood-red currents, believed to be portents of invasion.

As with Llyn Tegid—Lake Bala—in North Wales, the 'drowned community' is a retribution legend. The land once belonged to a princess—beautiful, of course, as princesses always were in these legends. She had an admirer she would not marry unless he brought her riches. So one day, he murdered and robbed a wealthy man and took the gold to the princess, who accepted him as her husband. But the ghost of the murdered man haunted them and warned them their crime would be avenged on the ninth generation of their family. This seemed reassuringly far away, but they lived to a great age and they produced many descendants. On an occasion when they were all gathered for a great feast, they were drowned by a tremendous cataclysm, which produced the present lake. It was said that on certain days buildings could still be seen below the waters and that sometimes the sound of church bells could be heard. Indeed, one legend is that of the Old Woman of Llangors who would emerge from the lake and sit on the weather-cock above the protruding steeple. When a disobedient child sauntered to the water's edge contrary to its mother's commands, with a doleful cry the old woman would exclaim, 'Come along my little child,' and in the twinkling of an eye, old woman and child, steeple and weather-cock would disappear below the water.

'A towne drowned by an earthquake', as Aubrey referred to it in 1656, is only one of the legends about the lake. From here comes the oldest of the persistent and widespread tales of the Faery wife, who leaves her mortal husband after he has struck, or even touched her, with iron. This last is a familiar feature in Celtic tales. In Irish, it is called a 'geis', a prohibition, or magical injunction, the violation of which is frequently the turning point in

the narrative. According to Walter Map's twelfth-century miscellany, a farmer called Gwestin, who lived near Brecknock Mere, which was the contemporary name for Llangors Lake, saw women dancing in his field of oats on three moonlight nights. On the fourth night, he caught one, who willingly became his wife, but warned him he should never strike her with his bridle. Inevitably, he eventually did so, though accidentally, and she fled, taking their children with her. Gwestin pursued them, but could catch only his son, Trinio. According to the legend, the youth disappeared after a battle with the men of Brychan, who ruled Brycheiniog in the early fifth century, but since Trinio's body was never found, it was believed his mother rescued him and took him back to the lake.

Gerald of Wales also called the lake Brecknock Mere, and added to the lake's store of legends one of his own. He related how, in the time of Henry I, Gruffydd ap Rhys ap Tewdwr, who was lord of a commote in Cantref Mawr, passed by the lake in the company of Milo, Earl of Hereford and Lord of Brecknock, and Payn FitzJohn, who then held Ewias. Both these men were Privy Councillors of the King, and Milo was chaffing Gruffydd about his claim to noble blood. 'There is a saying in Wales,' rejoined Gruffydd, 'that if the rightful ruler of the land comes to this lake and orders the birds here to sing, they all burst into song. . . . Well, you now rule the country, so you had better be the first to speak to them.' The birds took no notice of either Milo's or FitzJohn's commands, but responded to Gruffydd's loud clear voice, and his lengthy prayer for divine help, by beating the water with their wings, and 'singing', with one accord, much to the consternation of his Norman associates, and later, the King. It might be argued that Gruffydd's loud voice, and his dismounting, to throw himself flat on the ground as he roared out his invocation, had caused some consternation amongst the birds too.

As for the drowned community, the Rev. Dumbleton and his brother provided a possible key to that legend in 1870, when they established the existence of the crannog. Finds since have included not only the timber piles and stones used in its construction, but shards of pottery, remnants of fine textile and skeletal remains of ox, horse, wild boar and red deer. In 1925, a dug-out canoe, now in the Brecknock museum, was discovered there and carbon-dated to the ninth century. In 916, the Anglo Saxon Chronicle records that Aethelflaed sent an army into Wales, destroyed 'Brecenanmere' and captured the king's wife, among others. Since the lake is still there, the reference is obviously to the crannog, and the captured Queen presumably the wife of Tewdwr ap Elised, 'king' of Brycheiniog.









*She has gone back long ago into the lake,  
the lady of legend, taking  
her mild cows and small snorting calves  
and her own dark softness.  
A gentleness three times struck with iron  
is gone.*

Ruth Bidgood

*Llyn y Fan Fach*

THE legend of Llyn-y-Fan Fach has survived in manuscript form and as an orally transmitted folk-tale, of which there are several versions. The tale is a fascinating blend of Celtic myth, folklore and historical fact, so not surprisingly there have been many scholastic studies of it.

In the days of the Welsh princes, about the close of the twelfth century, there lived at a farm called Blaensawdde in the parish of Llanddeusant, Carmarthenshire, a widow whose husband had fallen in the wars. Despite her misfortune she seems to have prospered and her stock increased so she would send her young son to take part of the herd to graze on the nearby Black Mountain, where their favourite place was at the little lake, Llyn-y-Fan-Fach.

One day the youth saw on the surface of the lake the fairest maiden he had ever beheld. As he gazed at her, all he could think to do was to offer her the barley bread and cheese his mother had given him for his daily meal. She laughed as she refused his offering, saying,

*'Cras dy fara  
Nid hawdd fy nala'*

*'Hard-baked is your bread  
It is not so easy to catch me'*

Disappointed, he returned home, where his mother suggested he should take some unbaked bread the next day, which he did. All day he waited and it was only when he jumped up to retrieve his cows straying to the far side of the lake that the maiden appeared again. Once more she refused his bread, saying this time,

*'Llaith dy fara  
Ti ni fynna'*

*'Unbaked is your bread  
I will not have you'*

But she smiled at him as she dived back into the lake, so he took heart as he returned home.

His mother reasoned that if hard-baked bread were unacceptable, then lightly-baked bread might serve and this is what he took the third time. Again he watched all day, not noticing that some of his cows had fallen in on the far side of the lake where the mountain slope was steep. Then he saw them swimming towards him, herded from the lake by the maiden herself. This time she accepted his bread, and later his pleas to become his wife, on condition that he would never strike her three blows without cause. In some versions of the tale, the prohibition was not to strike or even touch her with iron. And there was a test.

She dived back into the lake, returning with another girl, exactly like her, and a noble-looking old man, who was her father. The test set the young man was to distin-

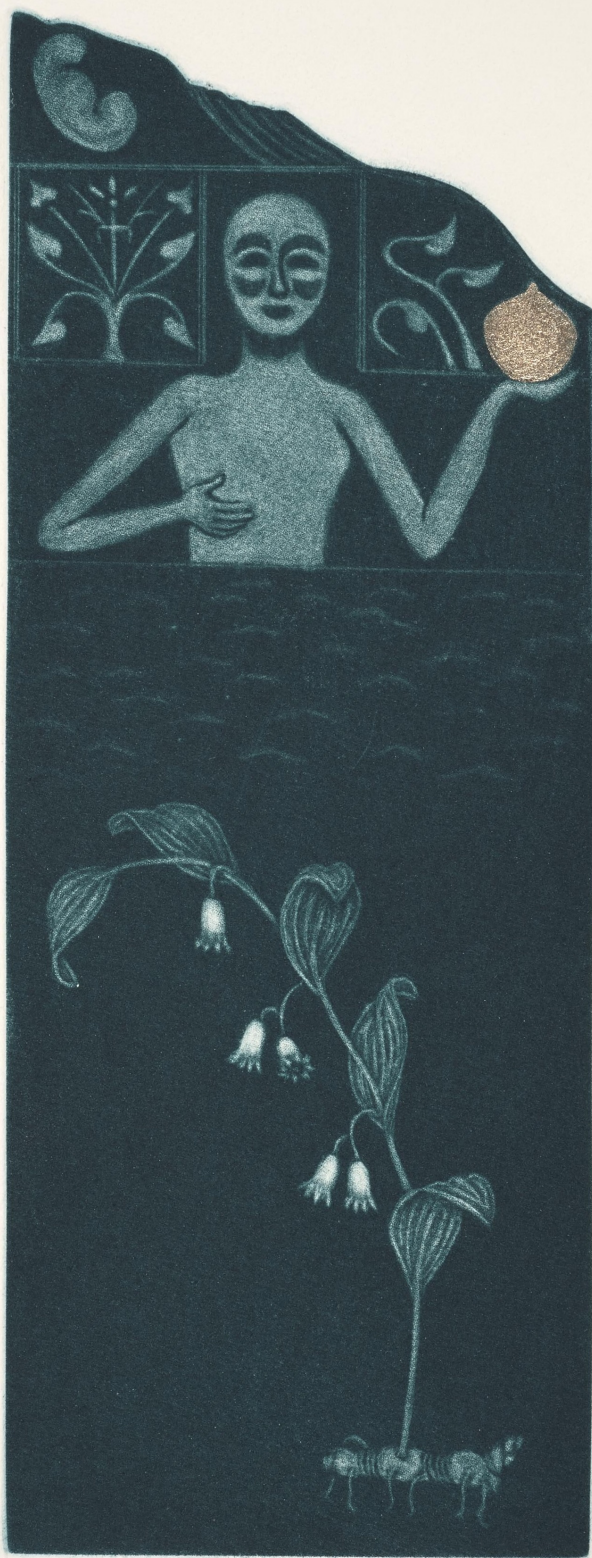
guish between the maiden he had asked to marry and her sister. This he was able to do with the collusion of the maid, who moved her foot slightly and he recognised the sandals she had worn, which differed slightly in the way they were laced. Her father gave his consent and admonished him to treat his daughter well, offering as her dowry as many sheep, goats, cattle and horses as she could count without drawing breath. The girl rapidly counted in fives and before her breath was exhausted, the fields around were full with the animals that came out of the lake as her father called them.

So they were married and lived prosperously at Esgair Llaethdy, near Myddfai, and she bore him three sons. But there was once a christening, to which she was reluctant to go, since for her, the birth of a child in this world meant the death of a soul in the Otherworld. When she had not gone to fetch the horse for the journey her husband tapped her shoulder, jokingly, saying, '*Dôs ! Dôs !*' — 'Come! Come!' — and she warned him that this was the first blow.

A wedding was held in Myddfai and the guests were merry, though his wife was not, so the farmer slapped her heartily on the back, telling her to cheer up, for there was no cause for sadness. 'The wedded couple are entering into trouble and you are too, for you have struck me a second time,' she said.

Years later, at a funeral, she was in the gayest of spirits and her husband, greatly shocked, touched her sharply on the arm. 'My joy is because this death means the birth of a soul in the Otherworld,' she said, 'And that is your third blow.'

Back to the lake she went, calling the animals by name, sheep, goats, horses and cattle, even 'the little black calf, though suspended on the hook.' To the lake they all went, the oxen in the field dragging the plough behind them. No one knows what became of her husband, but it is said her sons went often to the lake hoping their mother would appear, and finally she did. She told her eldest son, Rhiwallon, that his mission on earth was to heal the sick, and gave him a bag full of medical prescriptions, on later occasions instructing them all in the ways of healing. They became the famous Physicians of Myddfai, doctors to Rhys Gryg, Lord of Llandovery and Dynefor, who gave them land, rank and privileges at Myddfai. Generation after generation their descendants practised as physicians. History records that the last to practise at Myddfai were David Jones and John Jones, 'Surgeons', but the last descendant was Sir John Williams, physician to Queen Victoria.









*The dragon of our dreams roared in the hills  
That ring the sunlit land of children's songs.  
Red with the lacquer of a fairy-tale . . .*

Henry Treece: *Y Ddraig Goch – The Red Dragon*

*Y Tylwyth Teg*

THE warmth and light of Celtic mythology is as remote from the world of Greek and Latin myth as it is from the brooding bleakness of Germanic and Nordic cultures. But by the time it came to be recorded in Old Welsh and Old Irish by Christian scribes writing in religious houses, a Christian veneer was given to the pagan vibrancy of its myths and tales. Its gods and goddesses were demoted into Otherworld spirits and entities. Peter Berrisford Ellis gives a telling example in *Lugh Lamfada*, 'Lugh of the Long Hand' in Irish, his Welsh counterpart being *Lleu Llaw Gyffes*, 'Lleu of the Skilful Hand'. He was the deity of all the arts and crafts, reduced eventually to Lugh-chromain, 'Stooping Lugh', and from there anglicised into *leprechaun*.

The Welsh Saints' *Lives* offers a good example of the medieval Church's dogmatic judgements on ancient custom and belief, in the tale of sixth-century St Collen. The Saint overheard two men refer to Gwyn ap Nudd as King of the Tylwyth Teg and sharply rebuked them, dismissing Gwyn and his people as nothing more than devils. That night an invitation came from Gwyn ap Nudd to meet him, but Collen twice refused. The third, more menacing invitation he accepted, but took a pitcher of Holy Water with him. He was escorted to a fine castle, with beautiful, richly dressed people and was courteously greeted by Gwyn, who invited him to dine with him. 'I will not eat the leaves of the forest,' declared Collen and was equally disparaging about the fine apparel of Gwyn's followers before flinging the Holy Water in the faces of the king and his people. Castle, king and followers all disappeared thereby demonstrating the power of the Church over 'evil'.

For a twelfth-century cleric, Gerald of Wales adopted a rather more impartial attitude. Quoting Jerome: 'You will find many things quite incredible and beyond the bounds of possibility, which are true for all that,' he recounted the story of the priest, Elidyr, told him by his uncle, the Bishop of St David's, who had questioned Elidyr personally when the latter was an old man.

As a boy of twelve, Elidyr ran away from his tutor's harsh discipline and hid for two days under the hollow bank of a river. Two small men appeared and offered to take him to a land, 'where all is playtime and pleasure.' They led him through a dark underground tunnel into a beautiful country where there was no sun, moon or stars. The people there were small, but beautifully proportioned. They ate neither meat nor fish but lived on milk dishes flavoured with saffron, had no wish for public worship, but prized the truth, speaking contemptuously of the inconstancies of the upper world, to which the boy

frequently returned. He told only his mother of this country and, at her request, stole the golden ball he and the king's son played with, and quickly ran home with it. But he tripped at the threshold and the little folk pursuing him, snatched up the ball as he dropped it, showing every mark of contempt for him. Deeply ashamed the boy went back to the underground passage again but it had disappeared and he never found it again.

In Welsh folklore, the Tylwyth Teg, known also as *Dynion Bach Teg*, the Little Fair People, were invariably described as almost human, though much smaller in stature. They lived in communities and were usually well disposed towards mortals, unless they were crossed by them. 'Abundance of people saw them, and heard their musick which everyone said was low and pleasant, but none could ever learn the tune. . . . When they appeared like dancing companies, they were desirous to entice persons into their companies, and some were drawn among them and remained among them some time, usually a whole year, as did Edward William Rees, a man whom I knew well, and was a neighbour, who came back at the year's end and looked very bad.' This was reported by the Rev. Edmund Jones in his *Historical Account of the Parish of Aberystwith*, in 1779. What he didn't report was how long his neighbour thought he had been away; usually the participants in these revelries believed they had been gone only a matter of hours, or even minutes. Some did not return in the lifetime of their families and then, utterly bewildered, crumbled to dust when given food by the strangers they met.

Up until a century ago it seems the Fair Folk were seen frequently in the markets of Fishguard, Milford Haven and Haverfordwest. They bought the goods with silver pennies and were popular with the farmers because they paid well, but the poor Pembrokeshire labourers resented their forcing up prices.

And not all mortals appreciated their music. On the wedding night of Rhys ap Iestyn, at Pennard Castle, on the Gower, sentries outside the gate heard the sound of unearthly music and saw a crowd of the Tylwyth Teg dancing in the moonlight. When Rhys was told, he ordered that the little people should be driven away. In spite of the horrified warning of his wife, Rhys went out with his soldiers, but the Tylwyth Teg had already gone and a voice called out, 'Rhys, you have spoiled our innocent sport; your castle shall perish.' A fierce sandstorm blew up and the castle was slowly covered. The ruins remain of a castle that was cursed over six hundred years ago.









*Ho, Ddraig Goch, they tell me you are dead;  
They say they heard you weeping in the hills  
For all your children gone to London Town.*

Henry Treece: *Y Ddraig Goch—The Red Dragon*

*Llên Werin—Folklore*

'PEOPLE that know very little of arts or sciences or of the powers of Nature—will laugh at us Cardiganshire miners that maintain the being of knockers in mines—a kind of good-natured impalpable people but to be seen and heard, and who seem to us to work in the mines. . . . Before the discovery of Esgair y Mwyn mine, these little people (as we call them here) worked hard there day and night, and there are abundance of honest sober people that have heard them (although there are some people amongst us who have no notion of them or of mines either); but after the discovery of the great ore, they were heard no more. When I worked at Llwynllwyd they worked so fresh there for a considerable time that they even frightened some young workmen out of the work. . . . Our old miners are no more concerned at hearing them blasting, boring holes, landing leads, than if they were some of their own people.' *Lewis Morris (1701-65)*.

A contemporary of his, the Rev. Edmund Jones, stated with the same simple conviction, that those who dismiss accounts of spirits and apparitions, 'are chiefly women, and men of weak womanish understanding . . . which cannot bear to be disturbed with what is strange and disagreeable.'

Unquestioning belief in supernatural phenomena prevailed in Wales well into the next century and later. There are well-attested accounts of people witnessing the *Toili*, the Phantom Funeral, probably the most impressive account being recorded in Moeddin, in West Wales. It was observed by a farmer and his wife gathering sheaves of corn by a harvest moon to make the most of a dry day after a wet summer. While they were working, they heard voices on the parish road alongside their field. A great procession came into view, followed by a coffin on a bier, the crowd of mourners actually spilling over into the cornfield. Unable to make out what was being said, the couple were uneasy and went home, leaving the corn. Further along the road, the procession caused a tailor to move out of their way on to the verge of the field. Three weeks later, the real funeral came past this way.

It is reported that when Captain John Lloyd of Brecon died in the winter of 1818, it came as no surprise to the people of Llanwrtyd and Llangamarch as his *Toili* 'had been heard passing sometime previous' on the way to Llanwrtyd church, which is some twenty-five miles from Brecon.

Tony Roberts offers an account of a *Toili* in the Gwaun valley in Pembrokeshire in the twentieth century. A young man who worked as a porter on the Great Western Rail-

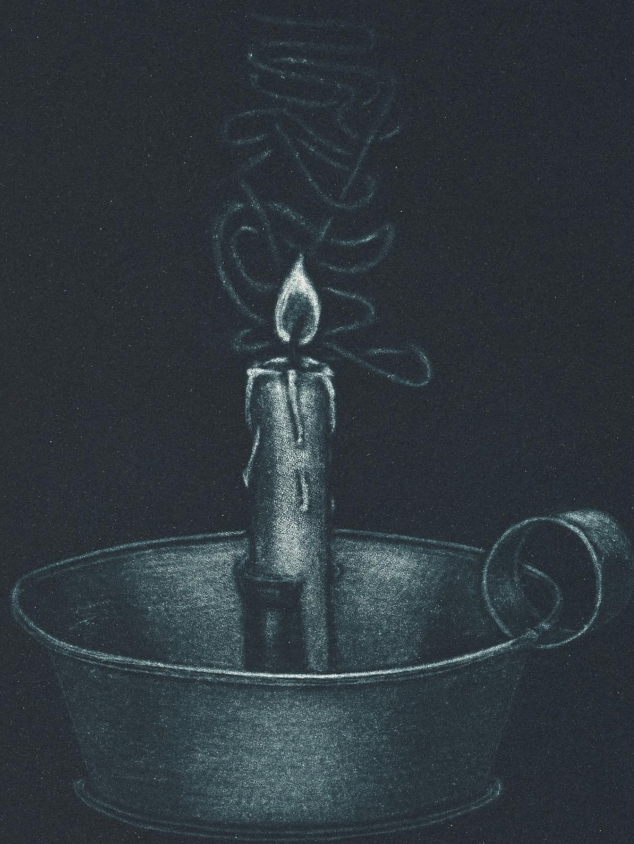
way near Cardiff, came home ill. A friend sat up with him all night and was so worried that about three in the morning he went to fetch the patient's father, an elderly man living in a cottage nearby.

As he went outside he was amazed to see a crowd of people and a coffin resting on some chairs, ready to be placed on the bier. When the procession moved on the young man found himself caught up in it for about a hundred yards before he could extricate himself and reach the father's cottage. Three days later the young porter died and his friend noticed, at his funeral, that eerily, the crowd and circumstances of the coffin were exactly as he had witnessed them three nights before.

Equally prominent death portents were the *Canhwyllau Cyrff* or Corpse Candles, always seen along the route a funeral would take or a death would occur. A large yellow flame represented an adult's, a small blue a child's. Occasionally more than one flame would appear at the same time, indicating a number of deaths. A well-recorded sighting took place as the Llandeilo to Carmarthen coach passed over the bridge at Golden Grove. The passengers saw three ghostly lights hovering over the river at the spot where a few days later three local fishermen were drowned when their coracle capsized. And at a mansion house in Carmarthenshire, the housekeeper saw five flames flickering in a window. A week later, five of the maids there died, suffocated by the combined lime and coal fumes in the newly plastered room in which they all slept and where a fire had been lit to dry out the plaster.

The countrymen who left the land to work in the coal-mines of South Wales took their superstitions with them. 'The mine is dark . . . If a light comes in the mine . . . the rivers of the mine will run fast with the voice of many women, the walls will fall and it will be the end of the world.' These were the words of the young miner in Emlyn Williams's play, *The Corn is Green*.

In the early months of 1890 miners at Morfa Colliery, in West Glamorgan, had reported many uncanny incidents. Corpse candles were seen in the tunnels, the sweet smell of 'death flowers' permeated the colliery and packs of fierce red hounds, the people called The Red Dogs of Morfa, were seen running throughout the district at night. This last was surely a folk memory of the *Cŵn Annwn*, the dogs of the Celtic Otherworld, whose howling always foretold death. On the tenth of March, nearly half the miners on the morning shift stayed at home. Later that day there was a terrible explosion at the colliery, and 87 miners were buried alive.





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LLYN Y FAN FACH — main image mezzotint  
 Female figure: The sepulchral stone of Eglwys Vair a Churig, Carmarthenshire.  
 The flowers, all traditionally used for medicinal purposes, the *officina* being the medicinal storeroom of a medieval monastery.  
 Alcanet — *Anchusa officinalis*  
 Butterbur — *Petasites officinalis*  
 Marsh Mallow — *Althaea officinalis*  
 Heath Speedwell — *Veronica officinalis*  
 Angular Solomon's Seal — *Polygonatum officinale* (This is the 'magic root' of stories and legends, reputed to open doors and cause water to spring out of rocks).

*Chwedlau is an exploration by Shirley Jones into fifteen centuries of Welsh myths, legends & folklore, & their place in the rich history of our nation. Each of the seven essays is prefigured by a blind-printed etching, or, in one case, by a small mezzotint, & faces a full-page mezzotint or aquatint. The essays were set at Gwasg Gregynog in 14-point Baskerville typeface, & printed letterpress throughout by Shirley Jones on Somerset velvet mouldmade paper. The title page calligraphy was designed by Angela Swan. The edition is limited to forty copies, of which this is number 31*

*Shirley Jones '05*





